{See Note at end.}

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The Use and Abuse of the Hope of Immortality.

A SERMON PREACHED ON EASTER SUNDAY, 1885, IN THE CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH, ST. LOUIS, BY THE PASTOR, JOHN SNYDER.

1 JOHN III, 3: "And every one that hath this hope set on him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."

What the writer means to say, in brief, is this: We are in daily expectation of the re-coming of the Lord Jesus. Under what circumstances, in what fashion of power and great glory this wonderful appearance shall consist no man knows or can know. Jesus himself was ignorant of the conditions under which this expected culmination of messianic splendor should take place. Nobody, he is reported, substantially, to have said, not the angels in Heaven, not the Son himself, but only the Infinite Life knows these forbidden mysteries. But one thing the apostolic writer of this letter did feel, and that was, that when Jesus *did* appear his disciples should be transformed into *his* image, *his* likeness. Just as a boy who has but little definite idea of matured life and character will say of a beloved Father or Teacher, "I want to be like him." The summit of the writer's hope, the top of his ambition was to be like Jesus. And his assertion in the text is, that all men and women who cherish this hope of a future likeness to Jesus, purify themselves as the Master is pure. Rely upon personal character and moral effort to make that spiritual likeness a certainty and a reality. This is a view of the future life of the individual and the church which is essentially ennobling and unselfish. The man desires and labors for immortality, not in the spirit of one who works for "hire and salary;" not as one who desires to exchange his virtuous deeds for personal rewards, in the market place of the soul's future; but as one who labors for the creation of a beautiful life, which, at that great day, shall resemble his beloved and transfigured Master!

The few words of the text present a searching query to you, dear friends, as the festival of Easter returns. How do you hold your great hope and belief of immortality? It may be a wonderful treasure of strength—the very fibre of character—a fountain of consolation: or it may be so selfishly, blunderingly, irrationally held, that it is a hindrance to virtue, not a help. Are you like the two disciples who simply longed to occupy the honorable places and wear the vice-geral crowns, in the future kingdom, or like the writer of the text whose might-

iest hope was to resemble the loftiest soul his life had ever known?

It used to be thought, you know, that any kind of a belief in immortality was a direct incentive to virtuous action. It acted upon a good man's hope, and upon a bad man's fear. High and disinterested nobility of character was believed to be impossible to a soul that questioned or disbelieved in the future life. This conviction was not confined to Christianity. Cicero said "no one without the great hope of immortality ever offered to die for his country." Of course our own faith furnishes the most abundant proofs of the commonness of this belief. The French Chateaubriand used to say, "There can be no morality if there be no future state." Luther, with characteristic coarseness, declared, "If you believe in no future life, I would not give a mushroom for your God. Do then as you like. For if no God, so no devil and no hell. * * Plunge into lechery, rascality, murder and robbery." Said Massillon, "Without immortality the maxims of charity, patience, justice, honor, gratitude and friendship are but empty words." Said our own Theodore Parker, "If to-morrow I perish utterly, I shall care nothing for the generations of mankind; * * morality will vanish." Said Fred. Robertson, "If the soul be not immortal, Christian life, not merely Apostolic devotedness, is a grand impertinence." Utterances like these, of course produced a natural spiritual revulsion and reaction. Men began to look into history, experience and their own consciousness, and as they looked they saw that the judgment of these wise and mighty preachers was not sound; their conclusions not warranted by the facts. They knew that such judgments brought dishonor upon the Divine nature. For while the knowledge or revelation of the future life was vouchsafed to but few—relatively—the obligations and needs of moral action and sentiment were universal. The fabric of civilization never has been built, and never can be built, without personal, social, domestic and public virtue; justice, patriotism and disinterestedness! The whole superstructure of the Hebrew Law was laid upon foundations of simple earthly morality and without reference to the future state; and to-day there are 400,000,000 of men, women and children, called Buddhists, among whom, the wisest scholars say, there is no belief in a doctrine of conscious immortality. To them this present life is an intolerable evil, and escape from it the richest blessing. On the other side, take those races and nations in whom the hope of the future has been most active and most intense. Are they always and everywhere conspicuous for their virtue? Surely the Mahometans, in whom the belief in immortal joys and sorrows burns with perennial fierceness, are not the models to which Europe looks for its loftiest characters. Think of the hardness, the brutality, the moral darkness of those Middle ages which issued into the Reformation. Universal belief in a future life was the dominant feature of faith among high and low. And if men secretly doubted, that very doubt was born out of the exuberant belief of the time. And how is it in this generation? Let us tell the truth frankly. How many criminals are hung for crime who are skeptical upon the subject of a future life? To-day the Roman church in New York is clamoring for ecclesiastical entrance into the jails and penitentiaries because so many of its children are constantly found in these retreats. And Professor Shedd was compelled to falsify history and declare, substantially, that the many defaulters and violaters of financial trusts in this land were men who had ceased to believe in the terrors of future punishment. All moral comparisons are odious; but let your own experience tell you how many defaulting cashiers and presidents are in good and regular standing in popular churches. I emphasize these things, friends, because I want to lay stress upon the great and vital truth that the belief in immortality may be held ignobly, that it may be consistent with crime and sinful selfishness, and that the great religious question of the hour is not, are you a believer in immortality, but *how* are you a believer in immortality? What function does this faith perform in your practical religion? It may make a man selfish and self-absorbed. It may help make him a tyrant to the poor, a man who is willing to postpone justice and fair dealing to the

weak to the uncertain equities of another world. It has done this in the past. AncientEgypt carried this monster growth of "other-worldliness" like an "Old Man of the Sea" upon its groaning shoulders, and the heavens never looked upon a despotism that crushed the life out of people more effectually. And it is important to look squarely at this side of our great religious hope because men to-day are clashing in their most vital interests: because what we call the "lower classes" are thinking enough and reading enough and knowing enough to say, "You can't scare us with your pictures of the Devil; you can't tempt us with your heaven built on brilliant soap-bubbles. We have toiled and suffered to build up the wealth of this world, and we mean to have a share in the estate." And seeing how meanly and selfishly and piggishly some of us live who profess to make the immortal hope a vital part of our religion, they come to trample upon that hope as a useless impertinence in human affairs—as a barnacle growth on human virtue. And, what is much worse, these men are saying, "You declare that virtue has its only root in this great belief. We are ceasing to hold this and it looks very much as if you were just like us. In the struggle for the wealth of the Earth we will see which is the stronger."

I believe that all history and all experience teach us, that as wrongly and selfishly as this mighty hope has been and can be held by the heart of man, no greater calamity could possibly come upon man than the dropping of this hope out of his life. Under many circumstances it has been a barrier to civilization, but it has been in truth the grandest lever of civilization. Especially has it been of marvellous value to that very class of men and women who have few of the advantages of intelligence, knowledge and worldly possessions. You may say that you are strong enough in virtue and other human consolations to do without this faith. Perhaps you are: I judge no man. You may be strong and brave enough, when Death has touched with his frost the bloom on the cheek you best love, to suppress all the unutterable longings for a meeting hour beyond the silent, shoreless sea. You may be able to say, "This is a harmful and irrational hope." And in some distant future of the world's history, men may grow so strong and rich and contented with this earth, that when they are called from the feast of life they will be richly satisfied to end it all "upon this bank and shoal of time." But that hour has not come yet. History shows that the men who have held the strongest faith in immortality have done the most to make this world a better place to live in. A great writer, quoted by Mr. Frothingham, says: "The humblest and homeliest form of benevolence, attention to the grievances and sufferings of the body, receives its most powerful motive from the sublimest of all truths, the doctrine of human immortality. A different result might perhaps have been anticipated. It might have been thought, that for the truest sympathy with the pain of disease, and the privations of infirmity, we must look to the disciples of materialism and annihilation; that they who hold the body to be our all would most vehemently deplore its fragility, and most affectionately tend its decline, that no love would be so faithful as that which believed at the deathbed of a friend that the real last look, the absolute farewell, was drawing nigh. But it has not been so. In the eye of one who looks on his fellow man as a compound being, the immortal element imparts not meanness, but a species of sanctity to the mortal." "The bare possibility that we may be dealing with immortals," says Mr. Frothingham, "should stimulate every kind emotion within us." These words of eloquence and wisdom reveal the true lesson of human experience and history. The great helpers of the race in civilization have been the men and women who most nobly cherished the immortal hope. This holds the mighty secret of Christianity. Jesus does not appeal to the selfish fear or selfish hope of men in relation to the future life. They were to live like God because they were God's children. They were heirs of an eternal life which is the blossom and harvest of their present life. Our own great prophet Channing found the living well of his inspiration in his works of love and ten-

derness for men, in the splendid conviction that the beggar and the sinner were God's princes and heirs in disguise, and that under their rags of misery and shame there was the precious heritage of an immortal life. This conviction has not always taken the fashion of belief which the rational mind can accept. But it has been the hidden root of progress, of human equality, of free governments for nations and men. The conviction that man is a ruined or an unfinished splendor, an unplumed archangel, a wingless seraph, around whose destiny revolves all the immense issues of the universe, has been the redeeming and ennobling secret of many a foolish and unhumane theology! The belief that the stainless Son of God left the splendors of his Father's throne and paid with the precious rubies of his blood-drops the ransom of a guilty race, this belief, with all its bad logic and worse morals, has moved generations into the upper air of heroism and self-sacrifice, because it means the indestructible dignity and importance of the human soul! * I rejoice with John Fiske that science has come to reinforce the conviction of man's spiritual supremacy and place it upon higher and more rational grounds. But Christianity was the prophecy of Science, and through all the blind and brutal ages of the past the blundering church held this jewel of belief, that man's immortal soul is worth the universe for its preservation. And I believe it will be a sad day for human justice, human progress, human charity and human liberty, when the essence of that belief lies no longer at the root of government and social life.

Now, dear friends, the deeply solemn thought of the hour is before you. You cherish this precious hope of immortality, and it may help to make you noble or ignoble. How do you use it in your conduct of life? Is it a bribe to a selfish and superficial morality? Does it help you think more deeply of the exceeding preciousness of your own character and the sacred nature of your brother's claims? The inspiring thought, the spiritual power in such men as Wilberforce, Garrison, Oberlin, Channing, Parker, St. Xavier always was, when they were surrounded by the weak, the vicious, the miserable: "This is a group of immortals. For them Christ died; for them a hundred redeemers have suffered at cross and stake and on the battle-fields of devotion and patriotism. For them, martyrs of truth have languished in prison and borne the unimaginable indignities imposed by bigots and persecutors." Has this immortal hope taught the rational man to-day, as it taught these men, the value and dignity of mankind? You may be thinking of Heaven as a refuge from high endeavor — a recompense for services rendered; a place of endless idleness. Such a belief will be no antidote for selfishness, will stimulate no generous emotions, inspire no heroic or self-forgetting conduct. Or you may think of that land of blessed mystery as affording a development of powers and capabilities which death leaves in an unfinished state: a place in which broken affections find their full fruition, and where man will become conscious, finally, that he is the son and heir of the Eternal.

"May I reach
That purest heaven,—be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused
And in diffusion ever more intense!
So shall I join the choir invisible,
Whose music is the gladness of the world."

Our "Church-Door Pulpit" hints its purpose in its name. It aims to furnish fortnightly a transfigured tract,—transfigured by being paid for, and by representing not so much a given system of beliefs as the emphasis, in somewhat varying beliefs, on "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion;" this tract to be taken from the rack or table at the church-door to the home, there to serve its little mission by reading in the family, lending to a neighbor, mailing to a distant friend, etc. The choice of subject is left to the writers, and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.*

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